Motivating Learners: At South Korean Universities

By Janet S. Niederhauser

Students at many universities often fail to reach their full potential as English language learners due to low motivation. Some of the factors that affect their motivation relate to the country's education system in general. Others reflect institutional and cultural views of language learning in particular. Although this article will draw examples from the South Korean context, it is assumed that the problems described and the solutions proposed can be applied to contexts worldwide.

Sources of Low Motivation in the Korean Context

One cause of low motivation among Korean students is the relative lack of difficulty they face in fulfilling their college graduation requirements. Grading is generous and often based on factors unrelated to academic achievement. Another cause is the inability of students to choose their majors on the basis of personal interest rather than entrance examination scores. Although Korean universities now are talking about giving students greater freedom in choosing their majors, only one institution has adopted the idea thus far. A third influence on motivation is gender. Large numbers of Korean women traditionally major in foreign languages, but many are not highly motivated due to the scarcity of well-paying career opportunities for female graduates and to parental pressure to marry upon graduation.

Student motivation also is negatively affected by a cluster of other factors associated with language learning. One of these factors is prior learning experience. By the time they enter college, Korean students usually have completed at least six years of English classes, yet most are unable to carry on simple conversations with native speakers or write sentences free of basic grammatical errors. Although many Korean middle and high school teachers still favor the grammar-translation method, and prefer teacher- centered classrooms in which little English is spoken, college freshmen tend to blame themselves for their lack of communicative competence.

Students face additional obstacles in college due to the common practice of grouping language learners according to class rank rather than proficiency level. In a society in which saving face is vital to self- esteem, this practice sets the stage for further negative learning experiences and poor achievement in students who enter college

with below average language skills and feel unable to keep up with their classmates. Unfortunately, even students who begin college with above average skills soon become less motivated, too, because they are not sufficiently challenged by the slow pace of instruction in these mixed- level language classes.

The practice of grouping language learners according to class rank frustrates students at both ends of the proficiency spectrum by depriving them of opportunities for real academic achievement. Since many students already blame themselves for their previous lack of success in learning English, they frequently become quite discouraged in their freshman year. Together, the need for achievement and attributions about past failures play important roles in language learning at Korean universities, and research on motivation in foreign language learning tends to support this conclusion (Dornyei 1990).

The lack of positive role models for English learners in Korea is another factor that has a negative effect on student motivation. The media regularly carry reports about civil servants and other professionals who fail to meet the government's own foreign language proficiency standards. Moreover, even college foreign language teachers often conduct all of their upper-level courses in Korean. Since research indicates that potential language learners are most successful when they firmly believe in their own capability to reach a high level of performance in the future (Tremblay and Gardner 1995:507), the absence of English-speaking role models in Korea may further explain why some students are not highly motivated.

Korean attitudes toward foreign languages and cultures also influence student motivation. Most middle and high school students receive only limited amounts of information about the history or current affairs of other countries. At the college level, courses that focus on understanding other cultures also are relatively scarce. In consequence, many students adopt the image of foreigners portrayed by the South Korean media, which often are less than balanced in their reporting about the influence of foreigners on Korean culture.

The media also shape attitudes toward languages. Each year around Hangul Day, which commemorates the promulgation of the Korean alphabet, newspaper articles and editorials complain about foreign words that are "contaminating" the Korean language and about professors who "overuse foreign languages." The Korean language, these writers claim, must be protected "from an all-out invasion of foreign languages." It should come as no surprise, therefore, that many college students harbor conflicting feelings about learning a second language. One college freshman told me in confidence that she was afraid of forgetting her Korean if she spent too much time studying English.

Strategies for raising student Motivation

In spite of the array of factors that tend to reduce language learning motivation, teachers working in Korea can use a number of strategies to increase their students' self-confidence and interest in English. Before choosing any specific course of action, however, teachers should take the time to get to know their students individually at the start of each term. This is especially important for native- speaking newcomers to Korea, who may be surprised to learn that the bored-looking student in beginning conversation class actually grew up in an English-speaking country or that half of the class did not want to major in English at all.

Helping students to connect language learning to their personal goals is a great way for teachers to begin addressing the motivation issue in their classrooms. One option is to have students fill out individual plans for success (see Figure 1 below).

These forms are based on motivational strategies recommended by Crystal Kuykendall (1992) and ideas of my own for the EFL classroom. During subsequent student-teacher conferences about the plans, teachers can help students view language learning within the context of their individual goals and help them map out strategies they can use to overcome their language-learning difficulties. The importance of setting specific goals as opposed to the general goal of "doing one's best" has been stressed by Tremblay and Gardner (1995:515) and other researchers. Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, and Sumrall (1993: 369), for example, emphasize the importance of selecting classroom activities that "students see as leading toward their personal learning goals." Even female students who do not plan to pursue careers after graduation can develop a greater interest in their studies if they are able to connect foreign language learning to personal goals such as the desire to travel abroad or to read English language publications.

At the beginning of each term, teachers should also take the time to explain their language-teaching approach to their students. They can accomplish this at any level by communicating in simple English sentences and by giving brief demonstrations of typical classroom activities. They should not assume, for example, that students accustomed to teacher-centered classrooms will automatically understand the reasoning behind pair work or other group activities designed to create an interactive learning environment. Students who have been taught to view language teachers as authorities on correct usage may question the value of working with fellow student. Although native-speaking English teachers may view pair activities as effective ways

to reduce performance anxiety and increase learner confidence, some Korean students may not feel they are useful.

Testing different kinds of group activities may help teachers find the right mix for a specific class. For example, teachers can use a pair-monitor technique recommended by Alice Omaggio- Hadley (in Young 1992:165) in order to give Korean students the extra guidance in correct usage they expect. In this technique, a third student is given a card containing the correct forms for a pair conversation based on selected language cues. The third student acts as group monitor and provides feedback to the students working in pairs. As they move from group to group, teachers listening in on the pair conversations can help students overcome their preoccupation with errors in form by rewarding them for good communication as well as correct usage.

Teachers also should introduce all new activities carefully and explain how they can help students improve their English skills. Motivation levels drop and anxiety levels go up when students are unsure about how or why they should perform certain language tasks. Making positive statements about upcoming activities, moreover, is an excellent way to increase motivation. By saying, "I think you're really going to enjoy our next activity," and meaning it, teachers convey an enthusiasm that is contagious.

New activities can be introduced without a significant loss of class time provided students are taught a number of common English classroom expressions at the beginning of the term. Teachers working at the college level in Korea, for example, should bear in mind that most middle and high school English classes are conducted primarily in Korean. Students in the first year of college, therefore, may never have heard the phrases, "Please turn to page five," or "Underline the verb in each sentence." It is especially helpful to write directions on the board or to provide students with written lists of frequently used expressions. In her study of the sensory preferences of ESL learners, Joy Reid (1987) found that Koreans studying at American universities were the most visual of all nationalities. These conclusions suggest that using a visual backup system for oral directions and other class work may help set the stage for more positive learning experiences at the college level in Korea.

Teaching non-verbal communication may be equally important. Students who have grown up far from a large city such as Seoul may never have had contact with foreigners before taking their college English classes and, consequently, may misunderstand the gestures and other non-verbal cues of their Western teachers. Suzan Babcock (1993:7-13) recommends teaching students specific forms of non-verbal communication such as the raising of eyebrows to express surprise or disbelief in order to prevent confusion and frustration among students who may misread teacher intentions.

Teaching students learning strategies is another way to influence motivation levels. In order to identify strategies used by the most successful learners in a particular class, one approach is to poll students about the techniques they use to learn vocabulary, prepare for tests, or reduce anxiety. These strategies can be passed on to the whole class. An alternate approach is to teach students strategies that are widely known to increase achievement in second language learners. For example, many Korean students view writing assignments as translation projects. This is probably due to the emphasis placed on translation in their middle and high school English classes. By encouraging students to begin thinking in English when they write and by explaining why this is useful, teachers will be helping students overcome poor language learning habits. Research has shown that strategy training is most effective when it is made explicit and treated as a regular part of the students' classroom experience (Oxford 1992:19).

Creating activities that foster real communication also will enhance motivation. Teachers of college-level writing classes, for instance, can help their students write articles for the campus columns in the English language dailies or even correspond with students in other countries. Students in one of my classes put together a collection of short articles they wrote about themselves and their country for students in a high school global studies course in the United States. They were proud of their role as co-teachers of the course's unit on Korea and worked on the proj-ect with great enthusiasm.

Another way to increase motivation among students is to send them positive messages about language learning and to teach them how languages change and grow. One enjoyable way to do this in the Korean context is to have students write lists of Korean English coinages and their American English equivalents such as "eye shopping" (window shopping). By working on these mini-dictionaries, students may begin to see how they and their Asian neighbors actually are shaping English and making it their own rather than being overwhelmed by it. Instead of devaluing Korean English, teachers can use it to help students overcome culturally based views of foreign language learning, which consciously or unconsciously may lower their interest in learning English.

In his article on the importance of teaching cultural skills as well as language skills in the context of international business, Brian Bloch (1996) cautions against the use of overly narrow teaching methods which focus primarily on the development of linguistic competence.

South Korea's emergence as an economic powerhouse only recently has made the cultivation of cultural skills an important concern. Courses in area studies are rare, and most university language departments still focus primarily on grammar analysis in the study of language and on aesthetic appreciation in the study of literature. Many literature courses, moreover, are still taught in Korean.

In my experience, however, bringing cultural content into the language classroom is one of the best ways of increasing motivation. In a society in which the conflict between globalization and nationalism remains unresolved, many members of the younger generation greatly appreciate the opportunity to learn about life in other countries and to exchange ideas with teachers who are sensitive to both cultures.

Although most institutions in South Korea have not yet adopted a more content- based approach to language learning and usually employ native speakers solely to teach lower level language courses, teachers can weave cultural content into any course by selecting appropriate texts and activities. Setting aside ten minutes at the end of each lesson to allow students to ask questions about American culture or other cultures of English-speaking countries is easy to do and gives students a chance to talk about dating practices, campus life, or anything else they choose. Having students write their questions on slips of paper and drop them anonymously into a culture question box, as Christina Zlokas- Cavage (1995) suggests, has proven itself to be a great way to increase interest and improve language skills even in the shyest students.

Although research in and outside the field of second language learning indicates that motivation involves a number of variables, most studies tend to agree that "an openness and positive regard for other groups and for groups that speak the language" (Tremblay and Gardner 1995:506) are powerful influences on language learner motivation. Therefore, efforts to increase the linguistic competence of students may depend on the creation of college classrooms that foster not only communication per se but also a deeper appreciation for English-speaking cultures. In the long run, universities that develop content- based curricula for their English programs will be in the best position both to motivate their students and to help them acquire the linguistic and cultural skills they need in the twenty-first century.

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Figure 1

Name _____

My Plan for Success

Where I want to be and what I want to be doing when I am
30:

My special skills, talents, and   Things that may prevent

interests that can help me reach my goal:

me from reaching my goal:

Steps I can take this semester that will help me reach my goal:

Steps I can take that will help me reach my goal:

How learning English can help me reach my goal:

The most important thing my teacher can do to help me learn English: